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DRAFT REPORT OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON POVERTY ALLEVIATION ON ITS FIRST SESSION

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
from 18 to 22 January 1993

Rapporteur: Mr. R. Konrath (United States of America)

Addendum

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Chapter I

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORK PROGRAMME OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE

(Agenda item 3)

(continued)

60. The representative of Nigeria said that poverty alleviation was part of his country's overall national development strategy. Expanding population was one of the main obstacles to eradicating poverty, and the only solution was to implement a population policy through mass education. To this end, a Programme of Mass Literacy had been initiated in 1975, and a primary health-care scheme was planned.

61. In order to bring social services nearer to the people, the Government had embarked on decentralization of economic, social and political activities from the federal level to the State and local levels.

62. Programmes directed specifically at the poor related, inter alia, to measures designed to achieve integrated rural development, training programmes for self-employment in agriculture and small-scale industry, irrigation, land-use control to ensure small farmers were not dispossessed, and subsidized mass transport. Other measures included subsidization of agricultural inputs and a series of measures to improve the situation of rural women through education and access to subsidized credit.

63. As far as programme implementation was concerned, international NGOs had played an important role and should be encouraged to participate in the Committee's work. The main problem was one of resources, and a favourable external environment (through better terms of trade and access to markets) and adequate financial and technical assistance were vital.

64. The Committee should seek to identify the main causes of poverty and to devise appropriate dynamic policies. Issues for consideration should include the relationship between alleviation of poverty and sustainable development.

65. The representative of Tunisia said that since independence, his country had pursued a people-first strategy in all development efforts. Twenty per cent of GDP was spent on the social sectors with a view to encouraging self-sufficiency. Poverty was incompatible with human dignity, and his country had, accordingly, pursued policies to promote civil and political rights as part of an anti-poverty strategy. Since 1987, Tunisia had been modernizing and restructuring the economy, but special measures had been undertaken to ensure that social programmes were not adversely affected. In

addition, efforts had been made to improve the economic performance of the country and control inflation by reducing the external deficit, improving the balance of payments and maintaining healthy reserves. There had been a general liberalization of prices.

66. Tunisia was promoting specific programmes for vulnerable social groups, including the young, widows, children and the unemployed. Measures included in particular improved access to the education system and other special programmes specifically earmarked for impoverished families.

67. Despite all these efforts, serious obstacles to poverty alleviation remained. Further work was needed to assess the efficacy of poverty alleviation programmes, including the financing of such programmes, and to examine rural poverty and the issue of women and poverty.

68. Finally, the areas where the Standing Committee could make a contribution included: new systems of financing productive programmes for poor families able to work; poverty and environment; provision of rural incomes to reduce rural urban migration; provision of housing; provision of information to facilitate follow-up and evaluation of programmes at country level. Inputs should be provided by experts who had been successful in their own countries with similar programmes. International agencies could also provide assistance. He concluded by calling for an international strategy to fight poverty and strengthen vulnerable groups.

69. The representative of Australia said that an exchange of national experience should seek to open debate not only on successful models, but also on those which were acknowledged to have drawbacks. For its part, Australia had been following an approach of opening a policy dialogue with recipient countries, enabling it to include poverty alleviation factors in more broadly defined development assistance programmes. The aim of Australia's development cooperation programme was to promote the sustainable economic and social development of people in developing countries, and poverty alleviation was intrinsic to that aim. Australia's aid programme promoted poverty alleviation in three ways: first, by measures to promote economic growth through activities in areas such as infrastructure, mining, agriculture, macroeconomic policy, institutional strengthening and higher education; secondly, by directly targeting the poor and focusing on activities in areas such as

primary health care and community-based development; thirdly, through immediate humanitarian relief, including emergency assistance and support for refugees and displaced people.

70. Economic growth over the long term was a prerequisite for sustainable poverty reduction, but the poor were often bypassed by the wider development process and therefore needed assistance. On the other hand, the poor were also able to contribute to economic growth, and assistance which directly targeted the poor could be used to increase their productive potential and expand their earning power, for example through income and employment generation, micro-enterprise development and small-scale credit. Australia's approach to poverty alleviation was tailored for each individual country.

71. Concerning the work of the Committee, there was vast experience of poverty alleviation within the United Nations system. It was a major focus of the work of UNICEF, UNDP and WFP, and UNCTAD should channel its efforts towards poverty alleviation into this broader approach. UNCTAD had a special role in exploring the connection between poverty and trade-related issues, and it should consult widely with other United Nations bodies and report on these consultations at future meetings of the Standing Committee.

72. The representative of Sri Lanka said that his country's JANASAVIYA programme was both a pro-poor macro policy, as well as a core national programme for poverty alleviation. It had started in 1989, and it enjoyed a sustained commitment from the highest political authority. Its objective was to release the creative energy of the poor, who were placed at the centre of the development process. A support system, comprising the decentralized bureaucracy, extension services and banks, facilitated and supported their efforts. The Janasaviya Commissioner's Department and the Janasaviya Trust Fund were the key macro institutions which helped to organize the support system and to coordinate the process.

73. Janasaviya was very much a process. Its core values and principles were: trust the poor; the poor will decide and do, while others support them; the poor must be separately organized; a countrywide process of learning by doing and always doing what is just and right.

74. Once identified by their peers, each poor family enjoyed two interrelated forms of direct support - namely food and non-food goods and access to bank

credits for up to a fixed 24-month period. The family had to work for its own improvement as a condition for obtaining the grant support. So far, 346,543 very poor families had been covered by the programme.

75. However, there was a clash of perceptions and methods between the old over-politicized bureaucratically dominated top-down paradigm and the new poor-centred, poor-first paradigm. In addition, the support system had found it difficult to reorient itself to the new pro-poor policies. Lastly, social mobilization was a major challenge; it had to be field-based, fully participatory and strategically focused on the central problems of the poor.

76. With regard to the work programme of the Standing Committee, Sri Lanka was ready to exchange experiences with interested persons and groups. It had already started a process of technical cooperation among developing countries.

77. The representative of Cuba said that, since 1959, Cuba had placed the highest priority on poverty alleviation. Its poverty alleviation strategies were still evolving, particularly in the fields of education, housing, medical services, etc.

78. In education, an effective campaign of adult education had been conducted by voluntary brigades. It had been found that the newly acquired literacy skills eroded after a while, but the problem could be overcome through provision of the complete primary school curriculum. Education in Cuba was free up to university level, and workers were given incentives to further their academic qualifications.

79. In the housing sector, in 1959 Cuba had inherited slums around the major cities. Construction of apartments had proceeded rapidly, but they had not proved to be the panacea for all housing problems. The recipients themselves had then been organized, and, working with experts in the various aspects of construction, had built their own accommodation. The housing problems were not entirely solved, but the urban slums had been eliminated.

80. The fight against illiteracy had made it possible for a new generation of inventors to come forth, who had been responsible for the maintenance of factories and other facilities. There had been general progress in science and especially in biotechnology. Medical services included comprehensive coverage, with special advances in cancer treatment proving of particular benefit to women.

81. The representative of Mexico said that international organizations could play an important role in the fight against poverty. This was particularly so

in terms of making available necessary information, as well as providing assistance and guidelines in those areas that required attention at the regional level. Economies of scale (in handling poverty alleviation issues) could be realized at the regional and national level. The end of the cold war had meant that the East/West divide had been replaced by the poor/rich divide. However, poverty was more serious than the ideological divide, because it affected the daily lives of people.

82. His country wanted to learn from the experiences of other countries in a number of areas, including job creation: Mexico had 1 million young people entering the labour market every year (in addition to those who were already there and might be unemployed). There were also problems associated with rural/urban migration, and his country would therefore like to exchange experiences on programmes to keep rural people gainfully employed, not just in agriculture but in other activities as well. He was thus interested in programmes of diversification in rural areas which could help eliminate the disparities between rural and urban life. Mexico was, of course, willing to share its own experience with interested countries.

83. The representative of Colombia said that what was most needed in the field of poverty alleviation was an exchange of experiences. In his country, poverty alleviation programmes had succeeded in reducing poverty significantly, and there had been a marked improvement in the distribution of incomes. Problems persisted, however, in both rural areas and large cities, and there was therefore a need for purposeful government action aimed at poverty alleviation. Effective programmes towards this objective would include education programmes, as well as universal basic health care. His Government was implementing programmes to assist small-scale enterprises financed by the Inter-American Development Bank, and efforts were being made to improve access to credit by small-scale enterprises and generally improve their competitiveness. Finally, his country was ready to share its experience with interested countries, and he called in particular for an exchange of experiences in identifying the poor and extending social security to them.

84. The representative of Argentina said that it was urgent to find solutions to the problem of poverty, which had actually worsened during the last decade. An exchange of national experiences on poverty alleviation was therefore fundamental.

85. Argentina had recently launched a new comprehensive social plan for the poor. Its objective was to achieve genuinely human development allowing for a better quality of life in the context of a participatory democracy. This could be done by optimizing public resource utilization with the aim of creating a modern, efficient and decentralized social policy. The first characteristic of the plan was decentralization of decision-making and implementation, which also implied the participation of non-governmental sectors and organizations who knew well the problems involved. The second aspect was monitoring and auditing, with the aim of efficient use of resources and administrative transparency. Thirdly, activities were to be coordinated by a recently established Federal Social Office. With regard to some of the specific measures envisaged under the plan, a specific package was designed for vulnerable groups. Measures included, inter alia, provision of food, housing and medical programmes for pensioners, preventive programmes for children at risk and the development of productive opportunities for disabled persons. A second type of measures were aimed at the creation of employment opportunities through the development of production centres, small family farms and small enterprises. Other measures included better access to education and development of human resources through increased granting of scholarships and improvement of educational facilities. Finally, nutrition and health programmes comprised, inter alia, the distribution of milk and medicine, childbirth care, construction of primary hospitals, vaccination and eradication of various diseases. At future sessions, her country would be ready to contribute to the deliberations of the Committee by sharing the experience acquired during the implementation of the new social policy.

86. The representative of FAO noted that by providing an intergovernmental forum focused on poverty alleviation, the Standing Committee could provide a mechanism for Governments to share experiences on how best to attack poverty through concerted action at the national and international levels. While FAO recognized that the design and implementation of policies and programmes to deal with poverty was the responsibility of Governments, it would be glad to assist in these efforts. In his statement to the Economic and Social Council in 1992, the Director-General of FAO had made a number of points relating to poverty alleviation, including the need for research on crops which the poor could grow, increased financial resources needed for poverty alleviation, and the declining commodity prices in international markets.

87. The terms of reference of the Standing Committee were very broad, and could not be tackled adequately by any single United Nations body or specialized agency. The work of the Committee should therefore be coordinated with that of other committees and working groups with a view to complementing their work and avoiding duplication.

88. She drew attention to the work done on poverty alleviation by FAO, in particular activities carried out in the follow-up to the 1979 World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) and the 1991 FAO/Netherlands Conference on Agriculture and Environment, the main recommendations of which were incorporated in UNCED's Agenda 21. Other major FAO activities on poverty alleviation related to nutrition and food security. In this context, she referred to the International Conference on Nutrition, which had been co-sponsored by FAO and WHO in December 1992. Since poverty was at the root of hunger and malnutrition, the World Declaration and Plan of Action on Nutrition adopted by the Conference could be added to the list of major intergovernmental agreements linked to poverty alleviation given in document TD/B/CN.2/2, paragraph 40. FAO was ready to assist the Standing Committee within the limits of its mandate and resources.

89. The representative of ILO said that although the Declaration of Philadelphia in 1944 had identified poverty as a danger to prosperity, 50 years later the Cartagena Declaration had come to the same conclusion, and poverty was still on the increase in many parts of the world.

90. With regard to devising a strategy for the fight against poverty, ILO thinking on the subject had focused in the early years on the question of identifying the poor and determining who they were. In the 1970s, attention had refocused on the determinants of poverty and the measures to deal with them. In this connection, he mentioned structural factors such as wealth and asset distribution, household endowments and external shocks, including adjustment programmes.

91. In its future work, the starting-point for ILO would be to help countries in their national efforts to develop anti-poverty strategies. The ILO approach to poverty alleviation and reduction consisted of three key elements: first, a sustainable rate of employment-intensive growth, which for most developing countries meant a minimum of 6 per cent; second, a move towards a market-oriented approach to the labour market, with the upgrading of labour

skills and increased access to assets by the poor; and third, the provision of safety nets, including social funds for the poorest segments of the population.

92. For such a strategy to be successful, Governments should treat poverty as an integral part of the national development strategy, promote a national dialogue, and broaden popular participation, as well as developing imaginative and low-cost schemes to reach the poor.

93. The representative of WHO said that health and socio-economic indicators had been deteriorating in many developing regions, particularly for underprivileged groups such as women, children, the unemployed, migrant populations and indigenous peoples. In that connection, the overall goals of WHO consisted of designing policies and strategies that were supportive of health services, and identifying vulnerable groups and providing them with equitable and cost-effective health care.

94. WHO had responded to the poverty crisis with a two-pronged approach which aimed at reducing inequities among countries and populations. At the country level, WHO initiatives included effective development of health services, while at the international level they involved fostering partnerships with other international organizations in order to improve the utilization of international aid flows. It was important that the health sector should be fully integrated into socio-economic development and the fight against poverty.

95. The representative of the World Bank said that the basic mission of IBRD was the reduction of poverty, which lay at the core of its assistance programme. The 1990 World Development Report, which reviewed progress with poverty alleviation, concluded that more than 1 billion people were still living in poverty. The World Bank had developed a two-pronged strategy for dealing with poverty issues, and it had carried out a number of activities to help translate the strategy into operational guidelines and actions and to support its implementation.

96. The progress achieved in implementing the strategy was reflected in the Bank lending activities. She provided information on project and programme lending devoted to poverty alleviation and reduction in developing countries and economies in transition. She also informed the Committee of the analytical and research work carried out by the World Bank on poverty-related issues.

97. The World Bank would follow with great interest the deliberations of the Committee and the development of its work programme, and it would be happy to share the output of its current and future work on poverty with the Standing Committee. In view of the wide attention given to poverty issues in many international organizations, the World Bank suggested that the Standing Committee could, inter alia, explore in more depth three topics related to poverty alleviation, and for which UNCTAD was likely to have a strong comparative advantage. Those issues related to links with trade and poverty, the environmental implications of trade policies for the poorest countries, and comparative patterns of growth and poverty reduction.